DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 802 EA 032 781

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TITLE	Teachers' Views on Salary Schedules.
PUB DATE	2002-10-18
NOTE	18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (Columbus, OH, October 16-19, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Contract Salaries; Economics of Education; Educational Finance; Elementary Secondary Education; Incentives; Occupational Information; Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Employment; *Teacher Employment Benefits; Teacher Placement; Teacher Qualifications; *Teacher Salaries

ABSTRACT

Little in the current literature reflects the views of those affected by the various proposals being advanced to improve the quality of teachers and teaching. This paper reports on a study that attempted to learn the reactions of teachers to some of the financial-incentive proposals being made to improve the quality of teachers and teaching. A focus group of eight classroom teachers from a suburban high school was convened to discuss some of the issues growing out of proposals to revise teacher compensation packages in order to redirect the dollars to improve student achievement. The focus group members responded to a series of questions (included in an appendix) related to financial incentives and salary-schedule issues. Some of the main ideas from the meeting are as follows: (1) No one individual inside or outside the school is responsible for student achievement; (2) the differing nature of student needs makes measuring student achievement difficult; (3) training and experience are well accepted as basic factors in salary schedules; and (4) there is no common agreement as to what effective teaching is. A followup interview with two teachers was also conducted. (The questions are included in an appendix.) (WFA)

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ED 479 802

TEACHERS' VIEWS ON SALARY SCHEDULES

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Mid-Western Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

Columbus, Ohio

October 18, 2002

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TEACHERS' VIEWS ON SALARY SCHEDULES

Background

Political leaders at the local, state and national levels use money to accomplish goals and implement policies. It should not come as a surprise to anyone that these leaders are seeking ways to use money to accomplish educational reform. Recognizing that teachers play a key role in any school improvement, the political leaders are increasingly interested in programs which relate educational performance, usually measured by student achievement test scores, with teacher compensation. The goal, of course, is to provide an incentive which will encourage better teaching and, consequently, higher student achievement. According to Scott LaFee (2000), in at least 20 states school districts are using some sort of bonus system linked to teacher performance. This number is projected to grow in the coming years. This is reinforced by the growing recognition that motivated and skilled teachers are the heart of any real and lasting educational reform movement.

A basic issue is whether additional pay based on student achievement is an incentive or disincentive. It may be that it plays no role at all. Teacher professional organizations tend to take the position that pay based on performance can be counter productive to collaborative teamwork among teachers. This has been the experience in states like North Carolina, which was an early user of the career-ladder approach.

Recognizing the political pressures for increased student performance at the district level, this paper, through review of the literature and interviews with teacher focus groups, will explore the tensions between the traditional salary schedule based on degrees and years of experience with salary schedules being linked to job performance.

Sense of Urgency

At the national level, the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) tries to address the issue of quality teachers. The law requires that every school district by 2005 must ensure that all of its teachers are highly qualified. Beginning the first year after the enactment of ESEA, districts must ensure that all teachers hired and teaching in schools supported by Title I funds are highly qualified.

Title II of the 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorized $3.175 billion in fiscal year 2002 to assist states and districts in recruiting, preparing and training high-quality teachers and principals. Under Title II, Part A, Subpart 2, Section 2123 of the Act, states can award subgrants to school districts for the following purposes:

> Developing and implementing initiatives to assist in recruiting highly qualified teachers (particularly initiatives that have proven effective in retaining highly qualified teachers), and hiring highly qualified teachers, who will be assigned teaching positions within their fields, including -
> (A) providing scholarships, signing bonuses, or other financial incentives, such as differential pay, for teachers to teach -
> (i) in academic subjects in which there exists a shortage of highly qualified teachers within a school or within the local educational agency; and
> (ii) in schools in which there exists a shortage of highly qualified teachers.
>
> Developing and implementing initiatives to promote retention of highly qualified teachers and principals, particularly within elementary schools and secondary with a high percentage of low-achieving students, including programs that provide -
> (C) incentives, including financial incentives, to retain teachers who have a record of success in helping low-achieving students improve their academic achievement.
> (D) incentives, including financial incentives, to principals who have a record of improving the academic achievement of all students, but particularly students from economically disadvantage families, students from racial and ethnic minority groups, and students with

disabilities (Public Law 107-110, 2001).

It is evident that federal government is concerned about providing a quality education for every student by ensuring and providing incentives for placing highly qualified teachers in every classroom. Meeting the 2005 deadline of having highly qualified teachers in every classroom is a very aggressive goal which presents an enormous challenge for school districts across the country to attract and retain highly qualified teachers. The next section will review the issue of equitable distribution of teachers within school districts and between school districts.

The Issue of Equitable Placement of Qualified Teachers

Equitable placement of qualified teachers can be a problem within a district where certain buildings have more senior teachers working in buildings that have higher performing students versus the least experienced teachers working in schools that have a high concentration of poverty with students that have low academic performance.

The bottom line is that in some districts the more experienced and highly qualified teachers are not equitably placed in the schools. In a large number of our large urban school districts, inexperienced teachers are concentrated in the schools with lowest levels of achievement and also in schools with a higher percentage of minority and poor students.

The issue of equitable placement of the most experienced and highly qualified teachers within a district is also dictated by the following factors:

1. Seniority clauses in union contracts that allow veteran teachers to choose where and whom they will teach (Blair, 2001);

2. State policies that prevent principals and other hiring authorities from obtaining information on teachers' failure rates on certification tests (Rossi and McKinney, 2001);

3. District policies that grant central office staff, rather than principals, the authority to select teachers from applicant pools (Spiri, 2001); and

4. Cumbersome internal district procedures that hinder qualified veteran teachers from transferring to low-achieving schools (Johnson, 2001).

Another equity issue is the wealth of a school district and the opportunity of wealthier school districts to provide a broader range of programs and quality teachers for their students. Affluent school districts normally have little difficulty in filling teaching positions compared to school districts that have either a low property tax base or a high concentration of poor and minority students. In a report done by the Maryland Department of Education in 1996-97, it was found that the Baltimore City Public Schools (the poorest school system in Maryland) received an average of two applications for each teacher opening, while the Montgomery County Public Schools (the wealthiest school district in Maryland) received an average of nine applications for each teacher opening (Dezmon, 2001). It is evident that the differences in community wealth has an impact on the school district's ability to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. Jay Blair (2000) points out that higher salaries, better benefits, signing bonuses, newer facilities, smaller schools, more resources, more opportunities for professional development, and larger budgets for recruiting purposes give the more affluent school districts the advantage of raiding neighboring school districts' best teachers because they can give them higher salaries and better working conditions. The question remains as to whether or not the federal government incentive plan will meet the needs of those districts that are hard-to-staff with highly qualified teachers and have low-performing schools. The issue of financial equity in school districts may not be overcome even with support from the federal government.

One of the major variables in attracting qualified teachers is the school district's

expenditures and property tax base. Disparity in teacher quality between school districts has been a problem. Teachers are often reluctant to seek employment in large urban centers and rural poor school districts. For instance, property tax wealth and capacity to pay for quality teachers give most suburban school districts the advantage of attracting top quality teachers by offering higher salaries. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future in an article entitled, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* finds that the average teacher's salary in Connecticut was double of that in South Dakota. Bradley (1998) cited a report on teacher development that found that well-to-do suburban districts have more than enough applicants, while inner-city schools struggle to fill the classrooms.

A June 4, 2000, *Akron Beacon Journal* article entitled, *Rich, Poor Districts Compete for Teaches,* spoke about the fact that suburban schools are luring the best and most experienced teachers with higher salaries and are thus creating a wider gap between the higher and lowest paid teachers (Newton, 2000, P. A6). In other words, the more affluent school districts are paying more money to retain the most experienced and qualified teachers. The next section will review some of the incentives that are being used to attract quality teachers to school districts that have low-performing schools.

Incentives

Most teachers will not volunteer to work in the most difficult schools. Incentives are being offered in school districts across the country to attract and hold teachers in the schools that serve students with the greatest needs. Some of the incentives are the following:

1. Bonuses: Signing bonuses, National Board Certified Teachers incentives, advanced certification bonuses, grade-point average bonuses and critical subject area and low-performing hard-to-staff school buildings.

2. Housing Subsidies: Relocation assistance, reduced or free rent and utilities, teacher housing, loans and grants, reduced-priced homes, low-interest mortgages, assistance with down payments and closing costs and tax credits. Most of these incentives are targeted to in low performing schools or areas where housing costs tend to be higher.

3. Tax Credit: State income tax credit and exemption from state income tax and federal tax of $250 for out-of-pocket expenditures related to classroom instruction (Prince, 2002).

Even though there appears to be an attempt to create more incentives for teachers to teach in low-performing schools, most superintendents and board's of education face: the challenge from unions by placing the most qualified teachers in lowest performing schools; alienation of the parents of students in the district's more affluent schools within the school district; and the dearth of financial resources to have incentives and competitive salaries and fringe benefits to attract highly qualified teachers. In the next section our focus group interviews reveal some interesting perspectives from teachers about financial incentives and whether or not they should be given in school districts to recruit, prepare, and retain highly qualified teachers.

Teachers' View of Salary Schedules

Most of the current literature on the structure of salary schedules reflects the view of political leaders, so-called experts and other proclaimed experts. Little of the literature reflects the views of those impacted by the various proposals being advanced to improve the quality of teachers and teaching. This study attempted to learn the reactions of teachers to the various financial incentive proposals that are being made to improve the quality of teachers and teaching.

To this end, focus groups of classroom teachers from a high school in a suburban school district, were asked to react to some of the issues growing out of the proposals to revise teacher compensation packages in order to direct the dollars to improve student achievement. The eight

interviewees ranged from fairly new staff members to very senior faculty members. The teachers were representative of all instructional areas in a typical high school. The focus group consisted of five males and three females.

The focus group members were asked to react to a series of questions relating to financial incentives and salary schedule issues (see Appendix A).

The first focus group of teachers declared that they believe that training and experience make a difference in the teacher's performance in the classroom. The teachers interviewed believe that training and experience factors in the salary schedule are relevant because they push teachers to upgrade themselves so that they build or upgrade a knowledge base that can be used in the classroom. One teacher was quoted as saying, "I remember back when I was a first-year teacher where the teacher in the next classroom had 20-25 years experience and she said to me that looking back over her career, she felt guilty at that time in her career for even taking a paycheck because her first couple of years she was so unsure of herself." They all believe that the degree component of the salary schedule pushes them to do additional work for degree purposes.

The focus group members strongly believe that there is no one individual who is responsible for student achievement and the fact that students bring different motivations and backgrounds to the classroom. The problem of defining achievement was discussed. It was noted many factors outside the school contribute to or inhibit student achievement, including parent involvement. It appeared during this portion of the interview there was a tone of frustration.

Overall, the first focus group discussion was animated and mostly positive. They seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss salary schedules and their impact on student achievement. The main ideas which seem to permeate the discussions included:

1. No one individual is responsible for student achievement. Persons within and outside the school are involved.

2. The differing nature of student needs makes measuring student achievement difficult.

3. Training and experience are well accepted as basic factors in salary schedules.

4. There is no common agreement as to what effective teaching is.

After the researchers reviewed the focus groups' responses, it seemed to be appropriate to do a follow-up interview in order to discuss concerns growing out of the group responses. Several members of the focus group were interviewed to clarify and amplify responses to the original questions. The follow-up questions are listed in Appendix B.

Two teachers participated in second focus group interviews. This discussion was based on the comments made at the first focus group meeting and was designed to explore some of the ideas which previously had been discussed.

The two participants in the focus group believe that training and experience are factors that contribute to a teacher's ability to perform positively in the classroom. The changing needs and expectations require constant updating. The focus group members also discussed the problem of motivating some teachers, the problem of being "frozen" when you reach the top of the salary schedule, and other similar concerns.

It was reaffirmed that the difficulty in pinpointing who is responsible for student achievement seems to be a major impediment to the identification of groups let alone individuals responsible. There was a reluctance to agree on a group of any size to be credited with improving student achievement. While the conversation was positive, the frustrations about the issue were ever present.

Conclusion

Relating teacher salaries to student achievement may appear to be an effective way to recognize and reward quality teaching. But, based on our limited sampling of teachers, it appears to be a very difficult and complex problem. While there have been some serious attempts to create salary structures which do, to some extent at least, attempt to recognize teaching effectiveness and/or student achievement (Wilson and Van Keuren, 2001), it is far too early to determine their success.

The issues addressed in this paper are not to be considered all inclusive. The areas of measuring teacher effectiveness and defining and measuring what constitutes student achievement need to be explored in a more in-depth study which includes all of the stakeholders, including taxpayers, students, policy makers, parents, teachers and faculty members.

This team of researchers needs to continue to explore the issues relating to teacher compensation structures. We welcome input from all sources. We realize that we have only scratched the surface of a major problem.

We believe that our focus group information will assist policy makers at the local and state levels in Ohio to consider the impression of the practitioners, namely teachers, before they continue to expand an accountability system that is becoming unrealistic and unmanageable. The data gathered from our work could have policy implications for other states.

Other Musings

As in many aspects of life, a solution to one problem may create or worsen another problem. If it is the goal of policy makers to have a more equitable distribution of the most effective teachers, might not salaries schedules and other financial incentives that reward for

improved student achievement tend to concentrate the most effective teachers in schools with most able learners?

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APPENDIX A

April 2, 2002

I Introductions

II Purpose of this meeting

III Discussion

A) The traditional salary schedule is based on the level/amount of training and the number of years of experience. Do these factors relate to what you do as a classroom teacher?

B) Assume for the moment that there was no salary schedule structure and that you are being asked to design a salary schedule that reflects what you do as a classroom teacher, what factors do you think should be used in the new salary schedule?

C) To what extent and how should your ability as a teacher be reflected in a salary schedule?

D) To what extent and how should your students' achievement be reflected in a salary schedule?

E) What other factors do you think should be a part of a basic salary schedule?

F) What are your other thoughts on salary/salary schedules.

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APPENDIX B

May 21, 2002

I Introductions

II Purpose of this meeting

III Discussion

A) You all seemed to support the use of training and experience as factors in a teachers' salary schedule. Is there a point beyond which these factors are less or no longer an indicator of a teacher's ability?

B) As we reviewed your responses from our first discussion, there seemed to be a reoccurring belief that no one person is responsible for a student's achievement. If this is so, can a group or team be identified and rewarded for students' achievement?

C) If so; what would be the makeup of such a team?
- A grade level/ department?
- A school building?
- The school district?
- Other?

D) As you have reflected about our last meeting, did you think of other factors you feel should be reflected in teacher salary schedules?

E) What are your other thoughts on teacher salary schedules?

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